

Imagine with Me: Church Planting and Imagination

May 27, 2022

Rev. Terri Hord Owens: Hello Disciples and welcome to another episode of Imagine with Me where I have the opportunity to speak with creative and energized leaders across the life of the church as we all together discern how we must imagine ourselves to be a new church for this extremely and ever-changing new world. In this season where we anticipate the celebration of Pentecost our congregations will receive the Pentecost Offering to benefit New Church Ministries on Sunday, May 29th and Sunday, June 5th. I hope that your congregation will give generously to this special offering that supports church plants in your regions and the work of new ministries at the general level to support all of our church plants. I'm excited today to talk with two leaders in our new church movement, the Rev. Tim Kim, Co-pastor of what is called a dinner church Root and Branch Church in Chicago, Illinois, and the Rev. Rachel Whoeler Co-convener of the Potluck Church in Madisonville, Kentucky. In this season again so excited to hear from these two leaders who are already understanding what it means to think about being a community of faith, a congregation in new and different ways. And so I want to welcome Rev. Tim Kim and Rev. Rachel Whoeler to the stage with me now thank you both for being here.



Rev. Tim Kim: Thank you, good to be here.

THO: Great. Well, as we were talking and getting to know each other a little better, Tim and I know each other from the Chicago area and University of Chicago and Rachel I know that you're in Kentucky and you and your husband co-convene the Potluck Church, and you both mentioned that you began your churches using the dinner church model.

I want to give you each a little time just to introduce what is your ministry and the context in which you're serving and hopefully after that we can talk a little bit about how the dinner model served you and your congregation as you begin your life together and perhaps how it continues to be an important aspect in terms of the way you order your life together.

So Tim, maybe we could start with you. I think Root and Branch is a little older than Potluck Church.

TK: Sure. Thanks, Terri. Yeah, I am Tim and I moved out here to Chicago, to go to University Chicago Divinity School as Terri mentioned. And while I was here, I you know didn't know what I wanted to do with myself honestly and really in my exploration of churches and ministry found that I wasn't sure I found I could find a home for myself really in the church. And at least the

ones that I was experiencing and checking out and going to. And so really the motivation to start something new. You might describe as a bit selfish. So I really wanted to just start something community that I actually would want to be a part of could feel at home in.

And so that was a real sort of initial genesis of wanting to do this planting work. And so when we started our we thought about what are sort of, you know, different models out there that might be ones that would be attractive and sort of new and fresh for people in my generation and gathering around the table and doing dinner church..We heard about a church, doing it in Brooklyn and maybe a few others and decided that actually was something that spoke to us for a number of reasons.

One is that it's a way of harkening back to the old times. Something that we believe that early church did of course and so kind of connecting to those roots. Sorry use a pun with our church name, but those roots felt important to us. Number two, we know the Disciples are a group that where the table is vital and important and essential to the practice that we do together. And we wondered if that practice, could be something that expanded to actually eating, not just at Communion, but as a whole way of doing worship together, and so that was another reason, we felt it was important. The third is that, it just is a great way to build relationships with people. When you start a new church, you're just really, you know, awkward.

Each stage of trying to get to know people and get them to know each other and get them to like each other and care for each other, and what greater practice do we have in most of our lives and to do that actually every day almost around the table with other people, talking and eating, and just something that feels familiar but also can be deeply spiritual as well.

So for those reasons, we started to dinner church and in general root and Branch, I would describe as I don't know if we fulfilled our vision that we set out to do, but certainly we have brought together people who couldn't find other Church homes to.

I think that's one really strong way to describe our context. People who feel like church outsiders. Generally people who struggle, the struggle to feel like, you know, church spaces are for them. And so we're we have been able to bring together a lot of people like that. Really just have a desire to build community in ways. Ways of asking questions and conversation and really wanting to be in a space that also speaks prophetically. I think to a world that is increasingly hostile to with religion. God, you know, I think love and just sharing in ways that are unique out there. So that's a little bit about who we are.

THO: That's great. I think this there is a theme I think among many new churches about people needing to find a place that belongs that feels like a place where they can serve and be fed to. So Rachel, tell us about the potluck church and how you began in your ministry context.

Rev. Rachel Whoeler: Currently, I can echo everything that Tim just said about the meaning and the journey I would say our started for me as I look back in hindsight is started at the Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt on a Monday Thursday when we were looking for some of us were

looking for an experience to have of Maundy Thursday, that did not involve us leaving our the living room. And we found that we had somebody had some apples and somebody had some bread and somebody had some other food until we all pulled together and formed a potluck meal and had communion after and stayed up until the early hours of the morning, having some of the best spiritual conversations I have ever had. And I knew after that, that was the kind of experience I wanted to have with church and kind of chase that for years until 2013 when we founded Potluck Church and it is a potluck meal. We worship around the table. Well, it is a worship based on questions, a series of questions. The liturgy unfolds is a series of questions that we make in the worship we make together.

So it's, it's really in hindsight as I think about the calling it I think that seed was planted back in 2000 or so for me

THO: Have either of your churches, Rachel, I think you said you're still operating on the dinner Church model, how what's experience of people do they is there more than just that worship or gathering experience? Is there other work that your congregations have been involved in once the community has been established?

RW: For us, we support each other's ministry. So we have people around the table who are the directors of the food bank in town or who do other the cancer support group in town, various kinds of ministries outside of their hour of worship, two hours of worshipping with us.

And so we bring our ministries to the table and support each other. In that way and that's, that's the way that we work as church together. Sometimes we volunteer together to do a particular project, but most often it's who can join me, who can contribute, who can help with, who can support this, and we support each other in our ministries that we live outside of the worship time together.

THO: Okay. Great, Tim, and how about Root and Branch, is it a similar kind of thing? Does Root and Branch initiate its own mission in the community?

TK: Well, we have a weird model of how we gather generally in the things that we do. We haven't been able to do dinner church now for what is it, two and a half years or so, basically, since the pandemic began. And so that's been a real loss to have a core practice and identity aspect of our church or a community. Not be able to take place, and we're slowly working our way back there.

But so we have a model where we do, what you call traditional church on Sunday mornings twice a month and then the other weeks we would usually gather for meals, but right now we are gathering in a various small groups. We call them to Constellation groups and some of those include classic things like Bible study. And sort of I have one that we call Home School where it's basically reading grad school theology together, and things like that. And we also have one that's centered around Justice work.

And in that one in particular it is really been focused for last year now on Prison Ministry. And that's an area in which we really feel like number one we can make an impact. I think, you know where a smaller church doing community outreach has is a thing that is important. But also one has to be mindful of their gifts and resources and their capacities. And so, you know, we wouldn't be able to open up a huge food bank or anything like that. But doing prison work essentially we have people who go out to prisons and try to support those who are being released things like that. Where a smaller congregation, like ours can make a huge impact I think is where we have been focusing our attention.

THO: I think what you just said is really important about recognizing what gifts and graces are within your context. I really believe they're different vineyards and different kinds of spheres of ministry. We can't all do the same thing in the same way. We shouldn't all try to do the same thing in the same way.

I visited with a congregation in Tijuana few years ago that's essentially a dinner church, but they form little committees around...Rachel, as you said, "come support my ministry. I am involved with this." And they will, they will create a little project based committee that go away. We're going to do this, and we're going to work on this together with Rachel, and we're going to do this, and we're going to work on this together with Tim. So I have seen that kind of flexibility and ability to kind of continually reimagine right, how you organized and structure your work together to be faithful to do what God has called you to be. For each of you, what have been some of the challenges and some of the joys of starting a new congregation?

There may be people out there I am sure there are people out there thinking "Oh, I don't think I could ever do that" or some people might say "Oh, I love to do that." What do I need to think about? So what did, what have you learned? What are the joys and what are the lessons and challenges that you have learned?

RW: Two things...I would say impostor syndrome is real, and you have to believe in that calling in that vision and not lose sight of it, whether it's writing it down or having accountability Partners, or joining in peer learning groups or support groups in your region with new church or finding others who are planning. I think those are all super important to keep reminding, you know, this is real. That God is calling you to this and God will give you the gifts and folks support Partnerships that you will need to carry it out and that's okay.

And then the other thing I would say is, to come to the realization that I don't have to have all the answers. And that when people ask me, theological questions, spiritual questions, questions about the Bible, it's okay to say, I don't know. I don't know, let me look it up or let me show you where to look it up. Or let us ask others and see where we come. Where we find ourselves and that took me awhile. I was used to you know, having been groomed by the academy, I was used to coming up with good solid answers. And to be able to say, I don't know was really important.

THO: That's a lesson we all no matter where we serve and where we Minister we all need to remember. It's okay not to have all the answers we're all on this journey together and some of us have particular gifts to assist in that journey, but certainly, none of us have all the answers. Tim, what have been your learnings, joys, challenges?

TK: Yeah, I mean, I could probably talk about challenges for a whole day if you let me, I think we know all the practical ones, like money and finding space and things like building a website and social media presence things you have to do today. I think maybe one, I would highlight, that feels still real to me is often you know, we serve a church that is exclusively Millennial and actually a little Gen Z now, so we're unique and having a very young church, young adult church and that means, and we're also in a city that means also, a lot of, a lot of moving, a lot of transient culture, one in which people are in and out of places constantly. And so, you know, I always say, if everybody who came to our church didn't move, we'd have a mega church at this point.

But really, we're looking at constantly, you know, core leaders people who become deeply ingrained into the fabric of the community, you know, in a year's time or like I got a new job elsewhere and just sitting through that year after year can be Quite difficult psychologically, it's difficult for community members to see their good friends, and pillars of the community leaving often. So that's been a major challenge for us.

Of course, there are many joys. I would, when I would highlight and for those who are thinking about doing this work, you know, the fir first time that we kind of assembled a little bit of a leadership team meeting, maybe about two months into our, our launch. I remember hearing people sitting around the table and beginning to call Root and Branch their church, or they would say our church. And just I remember leaving that meeting with our my co-founders and just sort of feeling this incredible joy. That thing that we envisioned in her hands and wrote about on paper, it actually taken root in people enough for them to claim ownership of the community as your own. And I am continually amazed by that even now many years later each time, somebody new steps in the door and goes from somebody I have no idea who they are to referring to Root and Branch is their church and their community. It's a feeling I think that never gets old for a church planner.

THO: What Joy right? What joy because ultimately that's you want people to claim that right is as their community so that they can live and flourish in that community. You have both mentioned, you know, it's part of dinner Church the conversations around the table the delving into deep issues of theology and possibly even practice. Are there other faith practices that have been impactful in your setting, and it sounds like worshipping, even Bible study. You know, I am always talking about prayer and bible study. I will be leading Facebook prayer life soon after we do this. So, talk to me a little bit about those kinds of practices within your congregations.

RW: Well, for us, the series of questions is really important and one of the first questions that we start with is, "where have you experienced God since we last gathered?" And that question

reorients all of us, not just on that day, but throughout the week, to notice things, maybe we would not normally notice and to wonder to ourselves and then together as a group was that God's influencer action or presence? At that moment or in that person, that's really formative.

And then the other thing of course, is food is always critical. So we have things like a pancake meal on the night before we meet on Tuesday. So the night before Ash Wednesday, for example, we eat pancakes, or we do we always celebrate All Saints and light candles? We have a special holidays. We will sometimes worship in homes. Normally, we worship in a train station that's a co-working space, but will worship in homes over Advent some years to get to see each other's Christmas trees and to be had a sense of home there. So, sometimes just the practice of the rhythms of eating and practices of eating or really important. Friendsgiving, for example, we use those holidays to change up our meals and change up where we worship and then, that gives us a rhythm for the year.

THO: Yeah, eating together is such an intimate space, right? And so that says that can make that spiritual connection even more powerful. Tim, what about you?

TK: Yeah, I mean, I want to just kind of go a little bit of what Rachel said to because I think Rachel and I are a bit joined-at-the-hip. We do these kind of talks often together communities are very similar, you know, we talked about the dinner church model little bit and I want to just say that as a spiritual practice doing a model like that. One thing that it does do is help a community grow and how it learns hospitality and being servants to one. Another, as you mentioned Terri, It's a very intimate thing to eat together in our community often Those meals would take place in people's homes. They would open up their homes to each other and whoever was hosting also, would often cook and sew and then everyone, you know, helps clean up and set the table and things like that.

So it's really just a big old spiritual practice in a lot of ways of really formation for people to What it's like to actually care for one another in a really tangible way and also to a Rachel set out.

I think we need to think of questions as a spiritual practice to, that feels to me, like, really vital. We recently had a gathering in our church or a congregante got up, and we're asking them to sort of, reflect on what values they saw in our church, and she got up and talked about the ways that she felt so empowered to raise.

Questions, we're talking about the Bible, specifically and raise questions, as she read the Bible, all the time in ways that she never felt that she could grow up and so, you know, questions as spiritual practice, I think especially for younger generation, a really important to cultivate.

Both a sense of being welcomed, but also for them to learn how to think about this stuff that they may not have a you know, a long-standing education in order.

Long-standing sense of tradition, it rights questions are a way for them to actually get their foot in the door.

Not, and not really just a way to be skeptical or to, or to push back for negative reasons.

It really is for them to learn what it's like to engage these old traditions.

THO: I would make an argument that there are lots of even older people who have been in church a long time and are spiritually poor. And by that, I mean they have not developed practices that really enriched. They come to church, they hear a sermon, they go home and maybe they participate in a particular project, right? A service project and people are comfortable with that.

I did my one of my field education experiences at a large Baptist Church in Chicago, over 70% of those people were previously on church and I met people of every socio Dynamic that being able to ask questions, right. In many of our churches we don't allow people to just ask the questions. We want to feed them what we think the Bible is saying, we don't want them to really wrestle with those texts and it will being free to ask the questions.

I think they're people across our church that just need the freedom in this space to ask questions and people quite often just have lived their whole lives in church, but never experience God in a real way. And I think that's one of the powers of the kinds of communities that you all are, are bringing to bear.

We got to wrap it up here shortly. But before we leave, I want to hear from each of you how does your church connect with our wider church? How does the church connect with the region or how do you see yourself as a Disciples congregation? Particularly is your part of the reimagining that we really need to do you are examples of one of the ways, some of the ways in which we can do church differently. But how are connected to the wider Disciples community?

RW: For us, I also am the co convener, along with Rev. Pope of the new church team for the region and so work with her and with the whole, all the planters in Kentucky, the Region of Kentucky, to, to support and equip and care for them. And, and also work with Jose Martinez, and prior to him, to help, develop relationships across the whole denomination with, with other Regional Groups in the church so that hopefully we're not just in our silos developing policies and practices and support and procedures, but that we're all lifting, all the boats together.

So that's one of the ways that we held. We also support our church, our church camp, and send counselors to our church camp and other aspects and also full disclosure, I am the West Area Regional minister of Kentucky. So I wear two hats and bi-vocational. So I have all sorts of ways that I get the opportunity to Sneak in conversations about potluck church and or to talk about the region in my Potluck Church setting. So I serve as a bridge builder in that way, I hope.

THO: Amen, that covenant. Having been a by vocational pastor I totally understand all of that. Tim, what about you? How does Root and Branch live as the Disciples congregation? Yeah, you are dually affiliated though, I believe, right?

TK: No. No, we're just Disciple.

THO: Okay. I was thinking at one point you were you had one of your founders was a UCC Minister that what this is?

TK: So we really see ourselves as a sort of experimental ground lab in a lot of ways for the wider church, you know, we think of ourselves as a collective as a sort of family unit. We know that, you know, a lot of established church can't go out and do whatever wild and crazy idea that they want. It's difficult to do that. And so new churches can be that place where those experiments are being carried out.

And so our covenant with the wider church, how we see ourselves really being part of this denomination is we want to be people who share everything we have learned as freely, and openly, and as Passionately as we can, as I mentioned, you know, Rachel and I have done numerous talks like this, as evangelists for the dinner Church model. We have done it in context of talking to a bunch of people.

We have talked to people on the phone, one on one who were curious, we have taken every opportunity. We can to really share what we learned over the years, with whoever's willing to listen, whoever reaches out to us the new church. Certainly people in the region, we have had conversations with two, And also training new leaders, I think that's a huge thing that we consider part of our ministry.

We been able to shepherd several people through ordination process now, many Disciples interns who come into our congregation and been formed by the way that we do ministry and hopefully one day we will continue to go out and do things wild and crazy things like we have done here and have that kind of experience in Courage as they do that. And so again, it's giving back as good as we can and wisdom that we have gleaned. And just doing that, wherever we can. I mean, I serve here at in the region as now will be the regional moderator next year. And, you know, we try to be, you know, part of new church and I worked with Tyrell, as well, when he was there in doing various things with him. And so, wherever we can, we try to plug in and give back.

THO: Great. That's so awesome. Welcome as your become, the new moderator of the region where I still have my not my standing but my residents, and I am always plugged in there. And Rachel, we're going to be coming to Kentucky for General Assembly next year and Saskia is certainly one of the people that's been working with us as we plan.

General assembly in July 2023, but it's been such a delight to talk with you both and I hope that people will heed the invitation or respond to the invitation to reach out, new churches in their region to learn to hear new ideas.

To pick your brains, to examine new models, new ways of being church that go beyond just where you meet. But how you meet in the way in which you engage practices the way in which we build community. One of the most important aspects of any congregation is Covenant, both within and then, as we have been talking about this wider Covenant, that allows us to be effective and faithful together. So, thanks so much for being with me this afternoon. I really enjoyed talking.

With both of you, and for our listeners, our viewers today, Disciples, the Pentecost offering will be taken in most churches on, May 29th, and June 5th. So you have an opportunity to give generously to the new church movement. Remember that offering is shared between the general church New Church Ministry and New Church Ministries in the regions, which allows us to support and encourage and nurture new church.

Leaders, like Tim and Rachel and the congregations that they serve how exciting to see people come to a place where they say my church, our church. Don't you want people to find that experience?

That spiritual foundation and formation as part of an Innovative and creative Disciples congregation and you can help do that by contributing to the New Church Ministry through Pentecost Offering. We're so grateful for your ongoing support of the new church movement and young leaders, like, Tim and Rachel, even older, Innovative leaders who have decided that they are just different ways that we can be people of God together.

And so, we open our hearts and minds as we continue to imagine how we must be a new church in this new world.

Remember that God loves you and so do I and keep imagining trust your crazy ideas is the name of a book that I read on sabbatical. So remember that God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly above all that you can ask or even imagine, so continue to imagine. God loves you and so do I. Take care.